

THE ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE

People in Europe and North America buy better food, breathe cleaner air and have less chance of being involved in a car accident, thanks to a Geneva-based United Nations body, the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE).

The Commission's initiatives benefit the daily lives of millions of people. For instance, ECE regulates the construction of motor vehicles and parts, the transport of dangerous goods and the quality of food products. Motor vehicles are safer because member States co-operate on ECE standards for items such as seat belts and headlights. Shoppers can buy food imported from distant markets, graded according to ECE standards. Travel, transport and trade are now much easier for citizens as a result of ECE enterprise.

Set up in 1947 by the United Nations Economic and Social Council, ECE has been working ever since then to strengthen economic relations among its 34 member States. Its membership comprises practically all countries of Eastern and Western Europe as well as the United States and Canada. The Commission has a staff of about 230, and a budget for 1990-1991 of \$33 million.

Gerald Hinteregger, of Austria, has been the ECE Executive Secretary since 1987. "We have a very diversified and a very broad programme of work", he says, "starting from economic analysis and economic projections to statistics, but also to very practical types of co-operation in the fields of trade and industry, the environment, transport, energy, housing and planning and so on.

"Our advantage is that we cover all areas of economic activity", he says, "industry and energy as well as the environment. This interdisciplinary capacity is becoming more and more important. We also have the great advantage of having as members all industrial countries of the world, except Australia, Japan and New Zealand.

"The products of our work are manifold. They range from binding instruments... like conventions and protocols, to policy recommendations

intended to help Governments formulate their own policies, to studies of a practical nature."

"In the field of transport alone", Hinteregger says, "more than 50 conventions, including the TIR [Transport International Routier] Convention, which facilitates tremendously the transport of goods by road, have been adopted and are being applied. We are now elaborating a number of legal instruments in the field of the environment. Our advantage is that we have this very broad membership. That means those instruments that are being elaborated apply to all member countries of ECE. Often they are applied also in countries of other regions."

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT, TRADE . . .

Protection of the environment is a major concern. ECE brought about the landmark 1979 Convention on Long-range Transboundary Air Pollution, and two protocols for sulphur- and nitrogen-oxide emissions control. These instruments have greatly helped reduce noxious gases. ECE is now working on a new protocol to reduce hydrocarbons and their transboundary flows.

In transport, ECE has formulated agreements covering, for instance, infrastructure development, road accident prevention and customs procedures. The TIR marking visible on the back of lorries moving goods is the result of an ECE Convention which allows loads to cross frontiers without time-consuming delays at intermediate customs. The TIR Convention allows the transit across frontiers of a million vehicles a year with goods under customs seals.

The Commission has been working since 1949 to harmonize commercial standards for perishable produce such as fruits, vegetables, eggs and meat, thus making their trade simpler. Up to 80 per cent of the trade among European countries in products covered by ECE standards have been influenced by these specifications. They have con-



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tributed to more uniform quality, with lower costs for traders and better returns to producers. At the same time, consumers have been guaranteed a higher average quality and better sales conditions. The standards are periodically revised.

ECE research produces reports such as the *Economic Survey of Europe* and the *Economic Bulletin for Europe*—among the most frequently quoted international economic publications.

EAST-WEST ECONOMIC FORUM

Since 1947, the Commission has been the only permanent intergovernmental organization for East-West economic co-operation, instrumental in promoting collaboration among countries with different economic and social systems.

The profound changes under way in Eastern Europe have enhanced ECE's role. "In our intergovernmental machinery we have about 47 subsidiary organs", Hinteregger says, "some of them highly specialized. This has been a meeting ground for experts from both West and East...an asset which should not be underestimated."

"These days the West is giving a lot of advice to the East. It is well-intentioned, but many times contradictory. It is advice from a Western perspective, but for situations which are quite different in the East. We can provide appropriate advice, with joint solutions elaborated within ECE. We have a long history of providing expertise; we are the natural forum to provide advice to Eastern and Western enterprises."

"We were the first organization that published a comprehensive analysis of joint ventures. We now publish a newsletter on East-West joint ventures, and we have come out with a guide on joint ventures which is intended to assist Eastern and Western enterprises. So what we do to help them is first of all analyse the [business] environment—that means the legal provisions, the administrative procedures, but also practical ques-

tions of how to set up a joint venture from the point of view of the contract that has been negotiated and so on. We are trying to approach these matters in a practical way, and we also involve the business community."

THE END OF PAPERWORK?

The Commission is now working on a project on electronic data interchange—the replacement of traditional paper documents used in international trade by direct exchange of information between computers. The move towards "paperless trading" is yielding considerable savings in international trade, and even in domestic transactions. Some sources estimate that trade documentation costs may be reduced by nine tenths. Still greater benefits can come through improved business management and better service.

ECE has been in the vanguard of technical innovation by launching and developing the standards known as UN/EDIFACT (United Nations Rules for Electronic Data Interchange for Administration, Commerce and Transport). Current activities include research, co-ordination of the development of electronic trade-related messages, and co-ordination of EDIFACT standardization carried out in other bodies. In 1989, ECE's Working Party on Facilitation of International Trade Procedures adopted for trial use messages concerning purchase orders, control, customs declaration, customs response, quality data, and international forwarding and transport. Twelve additional messages are being developed.

As a result of this ECE scheme, generalized electronic data interchange will soon become a reality in international commerce. "UN/EDIFACT is one of the most interesting and promising projects to facilitate trade," Hinteregger says. "We are setting up a trust fund to finance its development. Here is an example of where we work closely with the business community and get support from it."